

South Africa: The Marikana women's fight for justice, five years on

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Marienna Pope-Weidemann meets Sikhala Sonke, a grassroots social justice group led by the women of Marikana.



The women of Sikhala Sonke. Photo: Sikhala Sonke

The fatal police shooting of 37 striking workers at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine in August 2012 was the worst recorded instance of police violence in post-apartheid South Africa. Five years on, there have been no prosecutions and no real improvements – no compensation for the families living in grief and dire poverty.

There has also been no apology, although staggeringly Lonmin has created a commercial out of the incident [1]. But as always with the Marikana story, the most important characters were left out.

A few weeks after the massacre there was another death in the community. Amidst a brutal crackdown Paulina Masuhlo, a powerful community leader, died after being shot by police. Paulina's death helped galvanise the birth of Sikhala Sonke, a grassroots social justice group led by the women of Marikana.

As well as demanding criminal prosecution for the killings and compensation for the families, Sikhala Sonke also carries forward the demands those workers died for: a living wage and dignified conditions.

We cry together

It's anyone's guess how Lonmin accumulated its impressive collection of corporate social responsibility awards. More than ten years after signing a legal obligation to build 5,500 homes in exchange for mining rights, the world's third-largest platinum producer has erected just three show homes, while the families of its workers live in shacks without electricity or running water. This despite a staggering \$15million loan from the International Finance Corporation solely for the social development of Marikana.

Like many killings in black communities, wherever they occur, the horror is not easily absorbed by white society. It will be a stretch for many in the UK to imagine that a British mining company would rather let employees be shot and killed than pay a fair wage. But is it any more unimaginable than cutting corners to cut costs on the Grenfell tower blocks? Or fighting wars for oil even as our

dependence on them threatens millions of lives with climate chaos? It becomes clearer every day that we live in a system fuelled by the unimaginable.

Marikana might be far away, in a country very different from our own, but the struggle at the heart of Sikhala Sonke is one we should be able to identify with: the struggle of those hurt most by a powerful corporation to hold it accountable for its crimes. In Britain too, we are searching for ways to take back control of our lives and country from elite interests that see us as expendable.

In August I met and talked with two of Sikhala Sonke's leading figures, Primrose Sonti and Thumeka Magwangqana. They explained that for five years, the women of Sikhala Sonke have had to 'fight with two hands'. With one, they fight Lonmin on behalf of their community. With the other, they have had to fight for their place within that community, to be recognised as social justice leaders by a male-dominated union movement.

Sikhala Sonke means 'we cry together' and the name speaks to a pain older and deeper than the massacre itself. Far from transcending the yawning inequalities of the apartheid era, South Africa has now become the most unequal country in the world [2]. Though less than 10 percent of the population, white South Africans still control the vast majority of the nation's wealth [3].

As well as being highly racialised, this inequality is also highly gendered. A third of women in poor households are survivors of gendered violence [4] and young women are eight times more likely to be affected by HIV/AIDS. They are far more likely to be in low-paid and unpaid work, while in Marikana, the only compensation offered to grieving women is to take up the jobs of their dead in the dark labyrinth of mines, where they live under the constant threat of rape and assault [5]. Look deeper, to where racism and patriarchy intersect, and it is black women who bear the brunt of oppression in modern South Africa and around the world.

The erasure of black women from political struggle began long before Marikana [6]. While much is said of men who had to leave their families to work in mines and cities or resist apartheid, what is less visible is the contribution of women, both to the family and to the cause. Every dead or absent father leaves a mother to carry the family alone: a lifetime of unpaid labour alongside paid work to make ends meet. And while media coverage of the commission into the massacre cast the women of Marikana as grieving widows, that is only where their story began.

Keeping hope alive

In an economic system that sees value only in a wage, this inequality is embedded in the logic of the system. The profoundly political nature of unpaid family and movement support, without which no anti-apartheid movement in South Africa or strike in Marikana would be possible, fades into the background – along with the indispensable role played by women of colour in the movement for global justice.

Black women live each day on the intersection of racial, patriarchal and class oppression [7]. In this much complained about 'age of identity politics' [8], which is more broadly recognised amongst progressive circles in the global north, it has become 'polite' to concede that women of colour have a powerful role to play in movements for social change – but all too often this is mere lip service, paid in the interests of meeting diversity quotas or meant as 'compensation' for their experience, as though a slot on a speaking panel could redress generations of oppression.

But beneath all that is a simple truth: that like all the most painful experiences in life, oppression can be a great teacher. Being born on the intersection is not an enviable position. However, as those of us lucky enough to have learned from brave and brilliant women of colour in social justice work

will know, that pain can develop into a profound sensitivity towards unjust applications of power; the sort that sneak up on those without the eyes to see them and collapse our efforts towards equality from the inside. This kind of leadership, too concerned with power over others, stifles the oxygen needed to spark real change from below.

It is from intersections like this that our most powerful stories, inspiring ideas and promising leaders emerge. Recognising that means stepping back to seed spaces for that leadership but it does not mean stepping out. Allies too have a vital role to play [9] and the difference between recognising leadership from those most oppressed and reinforcing oppressive hierarchies by leaving them to all that labour alone, is about whether we are prepared to stay connected and above all, to listen.

Sikhala Sonke describe Lonmin and the ANC government as 'twins', both responsible for the situation in Marikana. And now is a vital moment because both are on thinning ice. Lonmin's share price is at an all-time low and last year, a five-month miners' strike forced a basic pay rise of 20 percent. Meanwhile the ANC, which has ruled South Africa since apartheid, is losing its majority as the next generation of South Africans feel they have sold out to white economic interests. It is hard to think of a place where this is clearer than Marikana.

Exploited by Lonmin and abandoned by their government, the women of Sikhala Sonke have kept the faith by refusing to abandon each other. It is that solidarity, they say, that keeps hope alive.

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P.S.

* October 13, 2017:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/the-marikana-womens-fight-for-justice-five-years-on/>

* Marienna Pope-Weidemann is War on Want's press officer.

* War on Want has partnered with Sikhala Sonke to support their work. [10] This marks the start of a renewed campaign supporting Sikhala Sonke here in the UK. The campaign is in memory of Marikana woman Paulinah Masuhlo, who died in September 2012 after being shot by South African police.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/lonmin-releases-tv-and-radio-commercial-in-a-campaign-to-honour-marikana-victims-11288338>

[2] <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-08-04-00-figures-suggest-sa-has-the-highest-concentration-of-wealth-in-the-hands-of-a-few>

[3] <http://theconversation.com/white-people-in-south-africa-still-hold-the-lions-share-of-all-forms-of-capital-75510>

- [4] <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-05-15-statistics-sa-one-in-five-sa-women-experience-physical-violence-young-women-hard-hit-by-hiv-aids/#.WeIBj0zpPow>
- [5] <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-05-15-statistics-sa-one-in-five-sa-women-experience-physical-violence-young-women-hard-hit-by-hiv-aids/#.WeIBcUzpPow>
- [6] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/somila-dondashe/the-erasure-of-black-women-in-activism-does-not-begin-with-marik_a_23078085/
- [7] <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could>
- [8] <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/01/women-poc-need-economic-justice-too/>
- [9] <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/things-allies-need-to-know/>
- [10] <http://waronwant.org/justice-marikana>